

Considering COVID a hoax is 'gateway' to belief in conspiracy theories

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Down the rabbit hole: Believing a COVID-19 conspiracy theory promotes further conspiratorial thinking. Credit: Benoit Beaumatin, Unsplash, CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/)

Belief that the COVID-19 pandemic was a hoax—that its severity was

exaggerated or that the virus was deliberately released for sinister reasons—functions as a "gateway" to believing in conspiracy theories generally, new research has found.

In the two-survey study, people who reported greater belief in [conspiracy theories](#) about the pandemic—for which there is no evidence—were more likely to later report they believed that the 2020 [presidential election](#) had been stolen from Donald Trump through widespread voter fraud, [which is also not true](#). Participants' overall inclination to believe in [conspiracy](#) theories also increased more among those who reported believing COVID-19 was a hoax.

Based on the results, the Ohio State University researchers have proposed the "gateway conspiracy" hypothesis, which argues that conspiracy [theory](#) beliefs prompted by a single event lead to increases in conspiratorial thinking over time.

Preliminary evidence suggests a sense of distrust may function as one trigger.

"It's speculative, but it appears that once people adopt one conspiracy belief, it promotes distrust in institutions more generally—it could be government, science, the media, whatever," said senior author Russell Fazio, professor of psychology at Ohio State. "Once you start viewing events through that distrustful lens, it's very easy to adopt additional conspiracy theories."

The study is published today in the journal [PLOS ONE](#).

The field of conspiracy theory research is relatively young, and to date has tended to look for traits that predict the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories at a given point in time.

"But if you read interviews or forums frequented by conspiracy theorists, you see a phenomenon where people tend to go down the rabbit hole after something happens in their life that triggers general interest in conspiracy theories," said first author Javier Granados Samayoa, who completed the work while a graduate student in psychology at Ohio State. "With COVID-19, there was this large event that people could not control, so how could they make sense of it? One way is by adhering to conspiracy theories."

The researchers asked 501 participants in a June 2020 survey to answer questions assessing their beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, [political ideology](#) and what is called conspiracist ideation, or one's overall affinity for conspiracy theories. In this section, participants used a 5-point scale ranging from "definitely not true" to "definitely true" to rate statements such as "Some UFO sightings and rumors are planned or staged in order to distract the public from real alien contact" and "New and advanced technology which would harm current industry is being suppressed."

Six months later, in December 2020, 107 of those same participants again responded to statements gauging their level of conspiratorial thinking. Researchers further assessed conspiracist ideation by asking participants to report the extent to which they believed that there had been extensive voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election.

Statistical analysis showed that participants who reported greater belief that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was released for dark purposes and that the severity of COVID-19 disease was blown out of proportion also reported greater belief that the 2020 election had been stolen from Trump. And compared to their baseline conspiracist ideation measured in the June survey, COVID skeptics had higher levels of general endorsement of conspiracy theories six months later.

The association held true even after the analysis took into account the association between belief in conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and voter fraud and conservative political views, said Granados Samayoa, now a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania.

The team also cited data from a large United Kingdom multi-part survey conducted during the early spring and late fall of 2020 that supported the gateway conspiracy hypothesis: The Ohio State team's analysis showed that belief among a nationally representative sample of UK adults that the pandemic was a hoax predicted increases in conspiracist ideation over time.

The Ohio State data showed one strong trend suggesting that financial distress during the lockdown could have been a factor in adopting conspiracy theory beliefs about the pandemic—even among those who started off with low levels of conspiracist ideation.

"And then there is the question: Once that happens, what changes over time? That's where we got into this longitudinal work, which has been absent in previous research," Fazio said.

While some past conspiracy theories have turned out to be true, this study focused on beliefs that are not supported by evidence and are undermined by the evidence that does exist. The researchers noted that a better understanding of the dynamics of conspiratorial thinking could help stop the spread of conspiracist ideation, which is associated with a [higher risk](#) for violence and discrimination and poor health choices, among other negative individual and societal outcomes.

"These findings show that we need to be prepared for any additional large-scale events similar to COVID-19 to stem off conspiracist ideation because once people go down the rabbit hole, they may get stuck," Granados Samayoa said.

More information: A gateway conspiracy? Belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories prospectively predicts greater conspiracist ideation, *PLoS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0275502](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0275502)

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